

## All Saints Sunday

*Revelation 7:9-17*

*1 John 3:1-3*

*Matthew 5:1-12*

Today's readings give us a picture of what the Christian church should be like at its best. The author of Revelation, St John and St Matthew all use very different language, very different ways of communicating, but what they say adds up to a coherent picture. They are singing from the same hymn sheet. At the heart of it all is love.

The image we are given in the Book of Revelation is, of course, a picture of the Eucharist! It is we who stand before the throne of God, dressed in white and worship him. That is why altar servers and clergy wear white. And once a year at least we do carry Palm Branches. But by rights the whole congregation should do the same, for we all gather round the altar, the throne of God, to worship. We all should wear white. The picture in the Book of Revelation is of the whole Christian Church.

And it is here, in the Book of Revelation, that we find so many of the words we use in the Eucharistic Prayer. In today's reading the angels sing:

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour  
and power and might be to our God forever and ever!

Revelation 7:12

And from time to time in the Church of England we sing or say a version of that hymn as a doxology to the Eucharistic Prayer

Blessing and honour and glory and power  
be yours for ever and ever Amen.

And if you ever wonder where the 'Holy Holy' comes from, look no further than Revelation Chapter 4:

Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God the Almighty,  
who was and is and is to come.

Revelation 4:8

The Book of Revelation has proved a rich source for Eucharist liturgy. But the point of the passage is not simply that we all need to attend the Eucharist, it is that we need to be focused on Jesus. It is written of the saints in heaven that 'they worship God day and night'. You might interpret that as meaning that those of us who have more humdrum lives are serving less. You might interpret these words as meaning that spending your whole life in church is the option that God wants us to choose. And you would be wrong. The saints in heaven can do that – they no longer have to scrub the doorstep. They no longer have to cook meals, clean the fridge, go shopping. The saints on earth, we, worship God in the quality of our ordinary lives, in the way we treat other people. And the saints in heaven are where they are precisely because of the quality of the lives they have previously led on earth. Revelation was written for a church in turmoil, a church that was enduring persecution. And those who were in heaven were those who had remained faithful even under persecution. Revelation is a book written to strengthen those who were frightened and to encourage them to overcome their fear with love.

But that is not where we are. The worst we are ever likely to suffer as Christians is mild inconvenience; slight frustration. But what lay at the root of the saints' sacrifice was love. They loved God and their loved their fellow saints. And they loved God and their fellow saints even more than they loved their own lives. We are unlikely to have to choose between loving God and our own lives. But there may be times when loving God means accepting inconvenience, accepting the frustration of our own desires and plans for the sake of love.

That conviction of the power of love is what also lies at the heart of John's letters. His first letter is like a great hymn to love; he keeps returning to that word, summed up, perhaps in his most famous words:

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God,  
and God abides in them.

1 John 4:16

In the short passage we heard today he observes that in the end we will be like God:

When he is revealed we will be like him.

1 John 3:2

This is a theme we find in John's gospel as well. Jesus uses the image of himself as a vine and us as the branches: as long as we stay part of the vine, part of Jesus, we will bear the fruit that he wants us to bear. We will love one another.

We cannot overstate importance of love. Paul wrote that

Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—  
and the greatest of these is love.

1 Cor 13:13

His approach to love was, in a sense quite shocking. You see, we often value what people do: we admire, we respect those work hard for the church or for the community; those who give selflessly of their time and of their money. We admire them even more when their achievements are obvious: hospices built and staffed; youth clubs run; churches restored to their original glory. But Paul says that unless the motive behind all these things is love they are worthless. That's hard to take. He goes even further. He says that even if someone gives up his life, if the motive is anything other than love he has wasted his time. Suicide bombers need to hear these words:

If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body to be burned but do not have love, I gain nothing.

1 Corinthians 13:3

The saints in the Book of Revelation who are in heaven are there not primarily because they have sacrificed their lives but because they loved.

Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount seem to put flesh on the rather general notion of love. God blesses those who show certain attitudes:

- Meekness or humility
- Hungering and thirsting for righteousness
- Being merciful
- Being pure in heart
- Making peace

There is no mention here of those who push themselves forward, look after themselves, resort to violence in any form. It all goes against the grain. It is not what we hear in the big wide world.

But the values of the world lead to the kind of world know to the first readers of the Book of Revelation. It was a world of persecution, violence, and betrayal. It was a lose-lose scenario – the kind of scenario you can see even now being played out between North Korea and the United States – or even between the European Union and our own country.

The Kingdom of God is the opposite of all that. It will not be fully realized on this earth. But it will begin. The Blessedness of the poor ins spirit and all the others will be fully attained in the next life. Bt it will begin in this life.

There is a story of a man who died and went to heaven. St Peter was about to admit him when he said

'Before I come in I would like to see the other place, just so that I know what I am missing.'

So St Peter took him down to hell. But the man was rather shock when he got there for the first thing he noted were tables groaning under the weight of the most tempting looking and smelling food. How could this be hell? But then he was even more puzzled because he then noticed all the people sitting at the table - they were totally emaciated, starving to the point of death.

'How can this be?' he asked St Peter. 'How can they be starving with all this food?'

'Well,' said St Peter, 'down here in hell there is a rule that you can only eat if you use the chop stocks provided.'

The man looked and to is horror he saw a man trying to feed himself with the required chopsticks - they were twelve feet long. He simply could not get the ends near to his mouth.

The man was glad to leave and made his way for the first time into heaven. But when he got there he was a little taken back. The tables of food were

just the same. And he saw to his amazement that so were the chop sticks.  
All twelve feet long. He turned to St Peter and asked.

'Do they have to use the same chop sticks?'

'Of course they do,' said St Pieter.

'So how can they possibly feed themselves?' asked the man.

'They can't feed themselves,' replied St Peter. 'But they do feed each other. That is the difference between heaven and hell.'

N Clews  
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